



Idaho Naturalist news

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Lewis and Clark Chapter joins the Idaho Master Naturalist Program!

Sara Focht, Idaho Master Naturalist Program Coordinator

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Bob Johnson, Gary and Nora Pearson, Carol Ebbs, Lorna Inglet, Alice and Campbell, new members of the Lewis and Clark Chapter on a tour of Lower Granite Dam.

A warm welcome to the leaders and members of the Lewis and Clark Chapter of the Idaho Master Naturalist Program! The Lewiston-based chapter is sponsored by Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the Clearwater National Forest, Idaho State Parks and Recreation.



The Idaho Naturalist News is a quarterly newsletter of the Idaho Master Naturalist Program.

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Greg Hodapp from Idaho Parks and Recreation gave a lesson on Interpretation to the Lewis and Clark Chapter members.



Mother Nature is Trying to Kill You: A Lively Tour Through the Dark Side of the Natural World

Book Review by Marylee Krebs Hale, Sagebrush-steppe Master Naturalist
Book Author, Dan Riskin, Ph.D.

Dan Riskin, Ph.D., an evolutionary biologist, is co-host of *Daily Planet* and *Monsters Inside Me* on the Animal Planet channel. He uses humor and personal experiences to demonstrate the less than appealing behaviors organisms use to assure the survival of their species. Riskin's description of having a botfly maggot removed from his scalp is gross and mesmerizing at the same time.

His book *Mother Nature Is Trying to Kill You: A Lively Tour Through the Dark Side of the Natural World* is divided into seven sections, one for each of the seven deadly sins. He provides dozens of examples of the rawness and brutality of the natural world to dispel the notion that Mother Nature is gentle, nurturing and peaceful. This is not a depressing or morbid work, but rather a well written look at what nature is really about.

For example, the chapter on the sin of Sloth is titled "Just Another Day in Parasite Paradise." So long as an animal is mooching off a host, it's a parasite, the definition of laziness. Take the beaver. It's famous for its industriousness and hard work. But the parasites that live in the beaver's body? They're just free loaders "taking full advantage of her hard work. And they give nothing in return." The chapter "Wrath: Venoms and Extinctions," pokes holes in the common view that Nature is peaceful and gentle. Killer whales are viewed by much of the public as Keiko in Free Willy. However, the truth is that Orcas mutilate their prey, smash it to pieces, and drown it to immobilize the animal before eating it. A predator taking down its prey is not thinking about treating it with respect and dignity. And Riskin refers to venom as a "chemical weapon." He also describes extinction as a type of large scale wrath wielded by Nature.

Stories about cockroaches and maggot reproduction, a Brazilian beetle that launches its fecal matter 30 inches away, the loggerhead shrike that impales its prey alive on barbed-wire fences, and cone snails that use a venom-tipped harpoon to snag a meal, are scattered liberally throughout the book. It's educational, if you like little-known random facts about Mother Nature, but it's also highly entertaining.



Beaver photo by IDFG

Wood Duck Nest Boxes on Bethine Church River Trail

Alan Crockett, Idaho Master Naturalist, Sagebrush-steppe Chapter

Alan and Alice Crockett moved from Idaho Falls to Boise in August 2014 to be closer to family. They immediately renewed their associations with some of the organizations they had enjoyed in Idaho Falls including Idaho Master Naturalists, the Native Plant Society, and Audubon. One of the reasons for choosing a home in southeast Boise was to be near the Boise Greenbelt and the natural areas such as the Bethine Church River Trail.

When walking and running the Bethine Church Trail and continuing into Ada County's Barber Park, Alan noticed that many of the Wood Duck nest boxes in the Bethine Church section were falling apart and were obviously not being maintained. Wood Ducks are cavity nesters and though they usually use a hole in a tree, they willingly accept nest boxes as alternatives. The females do add some down to the cavity, but don't really 'build' nests. Nest boxes should be cleaned annually and new wood shavings added to them. The deteriorated state of the nest boxes was noticed again on one of the monthly 'cleanup walks' by the Golden Eagle Audubon Society (GEAS). GEAS has adopted a portion of the Bethine Church Trail. Besides picking up trash, adopting organizations are also responsible for checking on the status of structures.

True to his "Mapman" nickname, Alan got out his GPS and mapped the location of all the bat and nest boxes along the Bethine Church Trail and in Barber Park. He then checked on whether nest boxes on the Bethine Church Trail and in Barber Park were regularly maintained and if so, by whom. Jerry Pugh, Community Programs Coordinator for the Boise Parks & Recreation Department and Scott Koberg, Director of the Ada County Parks and Waterways, didn't know who had put up the nest boxes nor whether they were being maintained. Upon further investigation, it was found that the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) maintains the boxes in Barber Park, but not the Bethine Church Trail boxes.

Alan was invited to join Michael Young (IDFG) and other volunteers on their annual maintenance of the Barber Park boxes. In Barber Park, the nest boxes are mounted on trees. None seemed to have been used recently by nesting birds. Many boxes had been occupied by squirrels; two had Western Screech Owls; no Wood Ducks.

Alan sought the advice of IDFG for replacement and maintenance options for boxes on the Bethine Church Trail. Several IDFG employees walked the Bethine Church Trail; saw the old and unusable boxes; and then made suggestions for the location of new boxes. Alan then approached Jerry about installation and adoption of new nesting boxes on the Bethine Church Trail. Given the "OK," Alan, and friends John Buzzell and Bill Seigart, removed all of the dilapidated duck boxes. They then put up 13 relocated or new boxes, some of which were built by Boy Scouts and provided through IDFG. It was decided to mount boxes on 10' poles (instead of trees) fitted with a 2' wide wrap of roofing steel as a predator barrier.

The new boxes are being monitored for use. So far, none have been occupied by Starlings or squirrels. If these post-mounted boxes are used for duck or owl nests, maybe some of the tree-mounted will be relocated to posts. While Wood Ducks have not laid any eggs in the boxes as of the end of March, there is some evidence the boxes have been visited by both Wood Ducks and Screech Owls (see photos on next page). In the latest check, a Screech Owl was present in one of the new boxes and remained in place when the box was opened. Alan, Alice and friends are willing to maintain these boxes for an indefinite period, but GEAS will adopt the boxes for the long term.



Continued on next page

Jerry Pugh, mentioned above and a 2014 Master Naturalist graduate, was interested in whether other nest boxes exist along the Boise Greenbelt that might be adopted and maintained by volunteers. Alan took his trusty GPS to Kathryn Albertson Park, mapped the location of all the boxes he could find and sent the map to Jerry who is now working to get those boxes adopted and maintained annually.



*Left: Western screech owl in nest box.
Below: Pair of Wood Ducks on nest box.
Photos by Alan Crockett.*



Field and Stream Magazine April 2015 “Heroes of Conservation Award” Mary Van Fleet

Karen Davidson, Idaho Master Naturalist Henry’s Fork Chapter

Congratulations to Mary Van Fleet who was chosen by *Field and Stream Magazine* to receive their April 2015 “Heroes of Conservation Award.” In 2007 Mary founded the first Master Naturalist chapter in Idaho, the Henry’s Fork chapter. She has led the group in partnering with state and federal agencies and with sportsmen’s groups and non-profit organizations on a number of projects benefiting the Henry’s Fork and Island Park. In 2014 alone, chapter members volunteered over 2000 hours of conservation work. As Mary stated in the *Field and Stream* article, “I volunteer because the Henry’s Fork is a very special place.” “If you love living here, it’s natural to feel responsible for its wildlife and world-class fishery.” As part of the award, Mary received a \$500 grant which will be used by the Henry’s Fork chapter on a project to be decided. Thank you Mary and also a special thanks to Anne Marie Emery, who nominated Mary for this award.

A RARE BIRD VISITS THE "WRECK"

Poo Wright-Pulliam, Idaho Master Naturalist, Wood River Valley Chapter

I have a wonderful job where I get to be a kid again. I work at Ketchum Parks and Recreation in the high mountain desert right in the heart of Idaho. During the summer I teach gardening and geocaching (treasure hunting) along with my passion, birding watching and field sketching. The kids each have their own notebook so we can list and draw what we see. Each fall, just before school starts, my birding students and their families join me on a camping trip up to the Intermountain Bird Observatory outside of Boise where the kids learn about bird banding and why it's important, then they get to release the songbirds and raptors that have been trapped and banded during the day and at night they get to hold and release owls! During the school year birding continues at an after-school program where some of my students and I also do Project FeederWatch.

This past winter some of us were in the kitchen filling water balloons with green and red colored water so we could put them outside to freeze, peeling off the balloon and then displaying them for our town's Christmas Tree Lighting. Imagine the excitement when in burst two of my birding students exclaiming there was a "new bird at the feeder!" and that, "It is a grosbeak! Come quick!" I couldn't just stop what I was doing or the balloon in my hand may have shot red water all over the walls, my mind raced as I tried to think of which grosbeak it could be. Certainly not the black-headed grosbeak, we have those in the summer. I thought it must be an evening grosbeak, they are around in the winter here but it would still be quite a treat as it would be a new bird for our count site.

I finally tied off the water balloon and ran to the feeder window where the kids excitedly pointed out their find. Our FeederWatch station is under some giant spruce trees just outside the windows at "the Wreck" (the kids affectionate name of the recreation building). And there, in the branches was a black and white bird with its back to us. I grabbed the little pair of binos the kids use, thinking, "Black and white? Maybe it's a woodpecker and not a grosbeak after all." But then it turned and looked over its shoulder and I saw that huge bubblegum colored beak...and then... that rosy chest... oh, that rosy chest! "GET THE CAMERA!" I shouted, "It's a rose-breasted grosbeak!" In my own excitement I forgot to let the kids finish identifying the bird, which I usually try to do, but a rose-breasted grosbeak in central Idaho on December 1st, in the snow, was beyond belief. He should have been in South America or Cuba a month or so ago let alone the fact that we have them maybe once every year or so in the summer here.

Calls went out to all the local birders and an ebird report was made. We hung a little guestbook in the tree and I taught the kids about what happens when a rare bird shows up. Birders drove from 10 different Idaho towns to see the bird and he did not disappoint, many had not only binoculars but cameras with large lenses. The kids would run over after school each day to see if our handsome grosbeak was still there and would show their parents when they arrived to pick up each child. Photos started going up on the "Idaho Birds" Facebook page along with comments about the kids being great little hosts. I couldn't have felt prouder of those young birders!

We decided to do a little math project too. Of the birders that responded to our query, we figured up to 100 people saw the rose-breasted grosbeak, including "the Wreck" kids and their parents. 3,307 miles were traveled with \$179 in gas being spent locally. Food purchased in our area amounted to \$130, no hotels were listed as everyone was able to return back home the same day. Our fine feathered friend stayed for 7 days. Three kids drew the bird and two photographers sent us photos, one (a stunning 11"x14"!) is now framed and on display at the Wreck for all to enjoy. How much can one bird teach us? The passion and excitement may now be passed on for generations to come.



*Red-breasted grosbeak, photo
CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 Anna Hesser, Flickr*

John Oakes, Henry's Fork Naturalist In Memorium

John Oakes had been a member of the Henry's Fork Chapter of the Idaho Master Naturalists since 2009 and had volunteered many hours of service in the Island Park area each summer. He worked on the "Bear Aware" campaign in 2009 knocking on doors in the Mack's Inn area and he spent several summers helping to rebuild the Jack Fence at Harriman State Park. He also built a unique pulley system currently used at the Buffalo Fish Ladder.

During 2013 and 2014 John became the trumpeter swan monitor for the Swan Lake nesting swans. His research resulted in 2 years of field notes and culminated in the writing of this great piece of scientific detective work titled "Intrepid Swans."

The Trumpeter Swan Society (Ruth Shea, lead) built a floating island nest in the Island Park area during the fall of 2014 as a result of John's work. Indeed the swans John watched were those from Swan Lake because it is known that there was no nest on Fish Pond. Hopefully this new floating island nest will provide a place for a swan pair to establish a territory and to nest in the future.

John Oakes, a summer resident of the Pinehaven Community, passed away quietly in Redwood City, CA on February 18, 2015 and we will miss him here in Island Park.

THE INTREPID SWANS

*2013 observations of John Oakes,
Idaho Master Naturalist,
Henry's Fork Chapter*

Editor's note: the following three pages are from John Oakes field observations, presented here unedited. I felt John's observations were a perfect example of a naturalist's work. The detail and descriptions written here are scientific observations that can and did (in this case) help conservation action for a species in need of habitat improvement. I feel these notes might be inspirational to other Master Naturalists, as they were inspirational to me.



Swan Lake is a small, shallow, body of water located in southeastern Idaho. It is west of and immediately adjacent to US Highway 20 which is the primary route to the west entrance for Yellowstone Park at West Yellowstone, Montana. The highway serves travelers to the park from eastern Idaho, Utah and points south and west. West Yellowstone is approximately thirty five miles to the north. The traffic on the highway can be quite heavy, particularly during the summer months. The Henry's Fork of the Snake River is across the highway and approximately one quarter of a mile to the east. Despite its proximity to the highway, the lake frequently supports at least one pair of nesting Trumpeter Swans and their surviving cygnets.

One of the goals of the Idaho Master Naturalist program is that each member contribute at least 40 hours of volunteer service annually to any or a number of natural resource agencies, organizations or projects. As a participant in the program I devoted some of my volunteer hours this past summer and early fall to periodically monitoring the adult pair of swans and the four cygnets they hatched and were tending on Swan Lake. My observations were then forwarded to the Trumpeter Swan Society.

2013 has been a very dry year in eastern Idaho. The winter snow pack and the rainfall amounts during the spring and summer have all been well below average. Furthermore, there was a prolonged period of above average temperatures during a portion of the summer. As a result, Swan Lake commenced to lose water and the shallowest portions started to become dewatered.



On August 16th I was unable to locate either the adult swans or the cygnets despite looking for them from several vantage points. At the time I thought they may have been hidden from view by the various reeds, brush and bushes in and around the lake that had grown taller and fuller during the summer. I was also concerned about predation but could not see any loose feathers or other evidence this may have occurred. Since the cygnets had not yet fledged I knew they had not flown off. I checked the lake a day or so later but still could not locate the swans.

After I forwarded this information I received an email message from Ruth Shea, the Greater Yellowstone Coordinator and Society Board member who indicated that swans have been known to cross the highway and intervening land to the river in past dry years. After receiving this information I commenced to check the river where it borders Pinehaven where I have a cabin. Pinehaven is a small, unincorporated development or subdivision composed primarily of seasonal or vacation cabins and homes. It is situated between Highway 20 and the Henry's Fork and is bordered on the north by Harriman State Park. It is across the highway from and mostly to the north of Swan Lake.

For the next few days I checked the river along Pinehaven but did not locate any swans. I also started looking from vantage points on the opposite side of the river since the view from one side provides a better view of the far side near the bank. This is because the view on the near side may be obscured by vegetation. On Friday, August 23rd, I stopped at Fish Pond, which is an artificial impoundment,

apparently created many years ago for irrigation purposes before it became part of Harriman State Park. It is in the southeast portion of the park and over one half mile to the east of the Henry's Fork. It has a constant source of water from nearby Osborne Springs which flows into it. A fairly constant depth is maintained through the use of a head gate in the earthen dam. The constant outflow is the source for Fish Creek which meanders significantly before it reaches the river.

I walked along a trail on the west side of the pond and when I cleared the trees and reached the dam I was able to see two adult swans with four cygnets on that arm of the pond. Furthermore, there were two more adults nearby. My initial reaction was that these cygnets had been hatched in a nest at the pond since they had not yet fledged and could not fly, and due to the distance and terrain involved. However, after I forwarded the information I learned that this may not be the case. After an inquiry by Ruth Shea, Keith Hobbs, then manager of Harriman Park, indicated by email that the swans must have recently migrated to the pond because park personnel had seen no sign of their presence or activity there during the summer. Subsequently I also talked to two other Pinehaven residents who stated they had taken a canoe trip on Fish Pond several weeks before August 23rd and they had seen no sign of swans or cygnets despite exploring the pond quite thoroughly.



In the meantime, I had been receiving mostly indirect information that some Pinehaven residents had seen swans and cygnets at different times and locations, mostly on the river, after August 16th. After the 23rd I contacted these neighbors to determine when and where they may have seen the birds. I learned that two neighbors drove past Swan Lake around 8:00 a.m. on August 16th on their way to Idaho Falls. They both saw two adult swans on the highway right-of-way between the lake and the road. One swan was on the shoulder near the road and the other further down the embankment. Their impression was that the birds were trying to cross the road by foot.

Several others reported seeing at least some cygnets on the river in Harriman Park a short distance north of Pinehaven during the evening of Saturday, August 17th. The birds were in a cove along the bank that they were able to observe from their cabins. One indicated she also saw an adult with two cygnets at this time but the adult flew off when a fisherman approached. The others stated they were able to observe the four cygnets in the same general area through Wednesday, August 21st. They saw no adults during this period. They also indicated that though unattended, the cygnets appeared to feed and swim about normally as a group and not be overly stressed by passing fishermen in drift boats. They would just swim off a short distance and continue feeding. Another neighbor stated she often takes a walk in Harriman Park early in the morning. She generally hikes along the river and saw the cygnets in and around the cove between the mornings of August 18th and 21st. She did not see them on the river after the 21st. Finally, a neighbor stated he saw just the cygnets in the area of the cove from the opposite side of the river during the late morning or early afternoon of August 21, but did not see them on the river after that.

As noted, my initial reaction upon seeing the swan family group on Fish Pond was that it seemed improbable that the two adults would be able to safely shepherd all four cygnets from Swan Lake over land and water to the pond due to the distance, terrain and potential hazards involved. The first, and greatest hazard would have been herding the four and themselves safely across Highway 20 on a heavily trafficked Friday before a summer weekend. That would have been followed by a hike of approximately .25 miles through sagebrush bushes, grasses and weeds to the river. It's impossible, of course, to determine what route they may have followed and they may have taken advantage of a dirt and gravel road in southern Pinehaven for a portion of the distance.

Presumably the next portion of the journey would have been upstream against the current on the river to the area where at least the cygnets and one adult were seen during the evening of August 17th. Though difficult to measure, this would have been a distance of approximately 1.25 miles. Then, the four cygnets would have remained in the same general area with apparently no or at least unseen limited adult attendance or direction for a period of four or five days. By this time, of course, the cygnets were moderately self-sufficient in that they had been walking, swimming and feeding themselves for several months. However, they still hadn't fledged and could not yet fly.

The final portion of the journey would have been between the river and Fish Pond. Again, it would be impossible to determine what route they may have taken. Fish creek empties into the Henry's Fork on the opposite side and approximately one-quarter of a mile to the north of the cove where the cygnets tended to remain while on the river. The lower portion of Fish Creek was worked on recently to improve it as spawning habitat for trout. The process deep end the stream in the areas worked on and the swans could have swam up the creek for at least part of the journey. However, the stream meanders greatly due to the terrain and would have substantially lengthened the journey. The creek also becomes narrower and more shallow in its upper reaches.

The birds may have also come ashore to cross to the pond at a point further upstream, which would have been closer to the pond. Whatever land route might have been chosen would have encompassed a journey of at least .5 to .75 miles over brushy, rough uneven terrain. Furthermore, there's a small hill that would have been an additional impediment along the most direct routes.

Without direct observation it's impossible, of course, to know what route may have been taken. However, the evidence clearly supports the view that the two adults and four cygnets located on Fish Pond on August 23rd was the same family which had spent the earlier part of the summer on Swan Lake. The two adults were seen up the embankment beside Highway 20 as if to cross toward the river on August 16th. Cygnets were then seen on the river for the first time during the evening of August 17th and observed in the same general area through at least the morning of August 21st. No swans were seen on the river after that. Finally, a family of two adults and four cygnets were found on Fish Pond on the morning of August 23rd. There had been no reports of swans on the pond before that date.

The journey of this family group is clearly a tribute to the instincts and intellect of the adult swans. Their ability to guide the four unfledged cygnets safely across the hazards of a busy highway from a threatened habitat and then from 2 to 3 miles over both rough terrain and water to a safer haven is truly quite remarkable.